

Management seeks to impose gag order on US postal workers

By Shuvu Batta
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United States Postal Service (USPS) workers are reporting that management is attempting to severely restrict their freedom of speech by imposing guidelines that pressure workers into keeping quiet and instructing them to direct all questions from journalists and concerned customers to “media representatives.”

Vice News released a document sourced by postal workers, which revealed the content of the guidelines[1]. The management memo states,

“If you are contacted by a media representative, please respond politely that you are not authorized to respond on the Postal Service’s behalf, but you will have an authorized person contact the representative. To that end, please ask the representative for this information:

- The name of the media representative
- The name of the media organization
- The representative’s contact information (phone number and e-mail address); and
- A brief summary of the information requested.”

USPS management tells workers not to answer questions from the public, writing,

“Avoid the temptation to ‘answer a few questions.’ Keep in mind that while most media representatives will identify themselves up front, sometimes they do not. If you are dealing with a customer, particularly one who asks a series of questions, it is perfectly appropriate to ask, ‘Are you a member of the media?’”

The motivation behind the memo is revealed near its end. “When a media entry could result in a negative or controversial coverage, it is crucial that the Postal Service provide a response as quickly as possible.”

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, USPS workers have faced increasingly dire threats of privatization. Multi-millionaire stockholder of rival USPS firms and a major GOP donor—Louis DeJoy—has assumed leadership of the Postal Service through a bipartisan process, and within three months has centralized power

around himself manufactured used the budget as a pretext to slash operational efficiency by ordering the destruction of mail sorting units and postboxes, curtailing overtime and shutting down post offices while overall making the USPS more reliant on third party contractors. These measures have been carried out with the aim of clearing the path for privatization of a service, which processes over 40 percent of the world’s mail.

The deaths of postal workers from COVID-19 have been largely hidden by management from USPS workers and the broader public. At the same time, USPS is being turned into a political tool by the Trump administration to ensure its re-election. To this end DeJoy has ordered the creation of a new department responsible for processing mail, putting a large question mark on the integrity of the 2020 election, in which mail-in ballots will be one of the primary methods of voting.

The USPS is a highly popular public service and has received an outpouring of support. While DeJoy told Congress that USPS workers need to have their health care and pension benefits “rationalized,” a recent survey taken between August 14 and August 18 by Reuters showed that 88 percent of Democrats and six in 10 Republicans said that “funding for the United States Postal Service should be increased to ensure Americans’ mail gets delivered in a timely fashion.” Overall, 78 percent said the US Postal Service was essential for the election and nearly three-quarters of respondents said additional funding was necessary for timely mail delivery.

As reports flood in from around the country of mail delays, including essential items such as medicine, questions are being asked about the internal operations of the Postal Service. Management is seeking to impose a gag order not only to keep workers quiet, but also to undermine their resistance, knowing full well that postal employees have the support of the vast majority of the US population.

One question workers may ask is, “How is it that a government agency is allowed to violate the First Amendment of the US Constitution, which guarantees the right of freedom of speech?” A brief published by the Brennan Center for Freedom of Information in the University of Florida shows that the United States Government and its related agencies have routinely violated the First Amendment for decades[2].

The brief states:

“Decades’ worth of First Amendment case law establishes that public employees have a constitutionally protected right to speak about work-related matters without needing their employer’s permission. Policies and regulations that require pre-approval before government employees can discuss their work with the news media are invariably struck down as unconstitutional when challenged.

“Still, agencies persist in enforcing rules curtailing public employees’ ability to share information with journalists. ‘Gag’ policies similar to those declared unconstitutional in courts across the country remain on the books at all levels of government, from Cabinet-level federal agencies down to the tiniest local police department. Journalists regularly report encountering heavy-handed screening by government public-relations offices, delaying or outright denying access to news sources.”

Because the process of filing a lawsuit against these policies is very cumbersome and costly, government agencies have been able to get away with severely restricting their employees First Amendment rights. The brief clarifies a critical point, that the effort to silence workers is a bipartisan affair. It notes that during the Obama administration (also responsible for the shutdown of over 3,700 US Post Offices, and reduction of over 150,000 full-time jobs), *The Society For Professional Journalists* sent a letter in 2015 stating:

“Requirements that no one in federal offices speak to reporters without notifying an authority, often a public information officer, have become more entrenched. We are similarly unable to obtain information from previously available experts within agencies, who are often only allowed to speak when in the presence of a press office staff, which chills their speech, or are prohibited from speaking with the media at all.”

The drive to silence workers is not limited to just federal employees. Recently, reports have come out showing that Amazon has conducted surveillance of its workers on private Facebook groups, subreddits, and

twitter; and hired employees for the specific purpose of spying, particularly monitoring any discussion of strikes and organizing. USPS workers involved in Facebook groups have also reported instances of co-workers being reprimanded for posts on social media.

The suppression of information about internal conditions within the USPS serves the interests of management, composed of a bipartisan cabal who are terrified of broader opposition developing within the working class, especially as rank-and-file committees of teachers and autoworkers have formed, independent of the Democrats, Republicans and pro-company unions. Within this context of an increasingly combative working class they fear that any news that exposes the true internal conditions of the USPS may spark a broad movement of postal workers.

Postal workers must insist on their fundamental right to free speech. This requires the development of rank-and-file workplace committees independent of the bankrupt and impotent government unions such as the American Federation of Postal Workers. We strongly encourage all postal workers who want to expose their working conditions and fight to defend the post office as a public service to contact the *World Socialist Web Site*. We will make sure that your identity is protected and that what you have to say gets heard by fellow workers around the world.

[1]

<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/7041222-Guidelines-for-Handling-Local-Media-Inquiries.html#document/p1>

[2]

<https://brechner.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Public-employee-gag-orders-Brechner-issue-brief-as-published-10-7-19.pdf>

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>